

## SERMON

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Prayer: May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Full breath...

You know what I think about the gospel writers? I think they were tricksters and had a wicked sense of humor. I would love to know what those first readers thought as they read or heard this 'good news'. Today's reading - right here after the quietly revolutionary genealogy where 4 women are listed as part of the lineage of Christ, followed by only 7 verses introducing the miraculous conception and birth of Jesus - has these strangers from some far off land showing up in Jerusalem looking for the

future king of the Jews. These strangers, they know something that no rich or powerful person in Israel knows - these *foreigners - unclean gentiles are leading the way*. And in the gospel of Luke it's shepherds - those dirty, untrustworthy guys who spend their days and nights out in the fields tending animals - it's the shepherds who have a host of angels proclaiming the birth of the savior. It just doesn't make sense. Right from the start we're clued in that this new life, this good news, is coming to the poor and marginalized.

The writer of Matthew has wise men from the east, the metaphorical place of new beginnings - where the sun rises each day - coming and inquiring about this baby king they are seeking. And Herod, the current king, and all Jerusalem with him, are frightened. Instead of catching the wonder and enthusiasm of these seekers, Herod is *tarasso* in Greek - translated as frightened, or anxious, but really it means stirred up. *Tarasso* is setting in motion what needs to remain still, and at ease. It means to agitate, to cause inner perplexity.

Do you know that feeling of *tarasso*? I do. (One day I got a text message from one of my sons - which cryptically said "we need to talk" and asked about setting up a time. Huh? What was he getting at? I felt *tarasso* - stirred up, anxious, worried, my mind spinning stories...it's a pretty familiar feeling for me, this being stirred up). Unfortunately Herod's response to being stirred up and agitated is catastrophic - he commands that all boys under the age of 2 be murdered.

This same verb, '*tarasso*' is used later in Matthew's gospel, in the story where Jesus comes walking across the sea of Galilee at night to his disciples who are in a boat, and upon seeing him, the disciples are terrified - literally, all stirred up. They are agitated when they should be at ease. And in that passage, from Matthew 14, Jesus responds - be courageous, it is I, do not be afraid. Jesus tells them to "*Tharseo*" - be strong within

yourselves. Don't be stirred up - don't allow "tarasso" to overwhelm you - no, Tharseo - Have inner courage, I am here with you, be at ease.

Herod definitely did not sense the presence of the Divine with him when the wise ones came asking about the child who was born king of the Jews. Note that wording. It says they came asking "where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Right from his birth this child is king. He's got authority, power - I can see why Herod was anxious. He was stirred up, and all Jerusalem with him. And what does frightened Herod do? Does he join the wise men in their quest? No. For Herod there is no curiosity, no interest in following the star and seeking this new life. Instead, Herod stays put in his seat of power, allowing his fears to drive him to seek death, not life.

Yet the wise ones, they continue on, curious, following the star, continuing their long journey, to find this new source of life. Like the shepherds, these are most likely people who know what it is to be "stirred up" - to live with change, and instead of fearing it, they act out of curiosity and are transformed by it.

The Wise Ones, when the star stops, we're told they were overwhelmed with joy. They rejoiced - *Chairo* - even before they went in and found the child. I preached on this word, *Chairo* - joy - during advent. It literally means, to experience God's grace. This rejoicing that the wise ones did, upon arriving, before even setting eyes on the king they have been seeking, *is being aware of and grateful for God's grace*. They stopped and rejoiced - noticed God at work among them. Here, in the beginning of his gospel, the writer Matthew has gentiles - *gentiles! Foreigners*, experiencing *Chairo* - the joy of awareness of God's grace. And they fall on their knees with joy.

You know who else has a wicked sense of humor? - Archbishop Desmond Tutu, head of the Anglican church in South Africa and one of the leaders of the apartheid movement does. Now in his mid-80's. When asked what guided him in the dark and stressful moments when his life was being threatened, he said: "well, I didn't do silly things like

stand in front of a lit window at night, but I also said to God 'if I'm doing your work, you better jolly well protect me.'" Getting up daily between 4 and 5 AM to pray, and pray some more, often 3 or more hours a day, has been his discipline for decades. He prays for everyone - his family, his country, those who others might call his enemies. Trusting that God was using him as an instrument of change has been Desmond Tutu's guiding star for his entire ministry. It has kept him focused on working for justice, and shined in dark times, guiding him when the way forward seemed hopeless.

What star, what light, guides you?

What guiding star are you following? What light leads you onward (forward)? The wise ones, the foreigners, the outsiders, they set out on a journey, followed the star that would lead them to the one who was called the king of the Jews. They left everything behind, seeking the light, and when they found it they were filled with joy. Joy! They found this child, sitting on his mother's lap, and these men who had traveled great distances, they humbly fell on their knees and worshipped this child. They paid him homage, with joy in their hearts, bearing costly gifts. The star led them to finding the source of new life - the Christ child.

In contrast we have King Herod. What was his guiding star? King Herod, and all of Jerusalem with him - they were frightened. None of them went seeking, following the star. They remained stirred up, agitated, not seeking the one who would tell them "tharseo" - have courage, I am with you, be at ease.

When you're seeking - What light guides your way?

Our story doesn't end here. The wise ones kept seeking, and when they saw the child they opened their treasure chests, offering their gifts. They offered their own particular, unique gifts.

I've been reading about the refugees in El Paso, Texas - how in the days surrounding Christmas nearly 2000 men, women and children were released from ICE detention centers onto the streets of that city. One shelter in particular, Annunciation House, has been overwhelmed not only by the influx of people needing shelter, but also by the outpouring of love from the community in both support and supplies - from warm coats to diapers. People arriving into El Paso for the College Football Sun Bowl last week, some of them brought gifts along - blankets, new clothes, money for shelter and bus tickets. They arrived from east and west, north and south, and shared their gifts with strangers. Annunciation House became so overwhelmed with donations that they asked people to call before they came. Some have stayed to help cook food. Others to give rides. Gifts come in all sorts of ways.

What gifts do you bring the lowly one this season?

What gifts do you bring to share with this source of new life?

Move into communion...